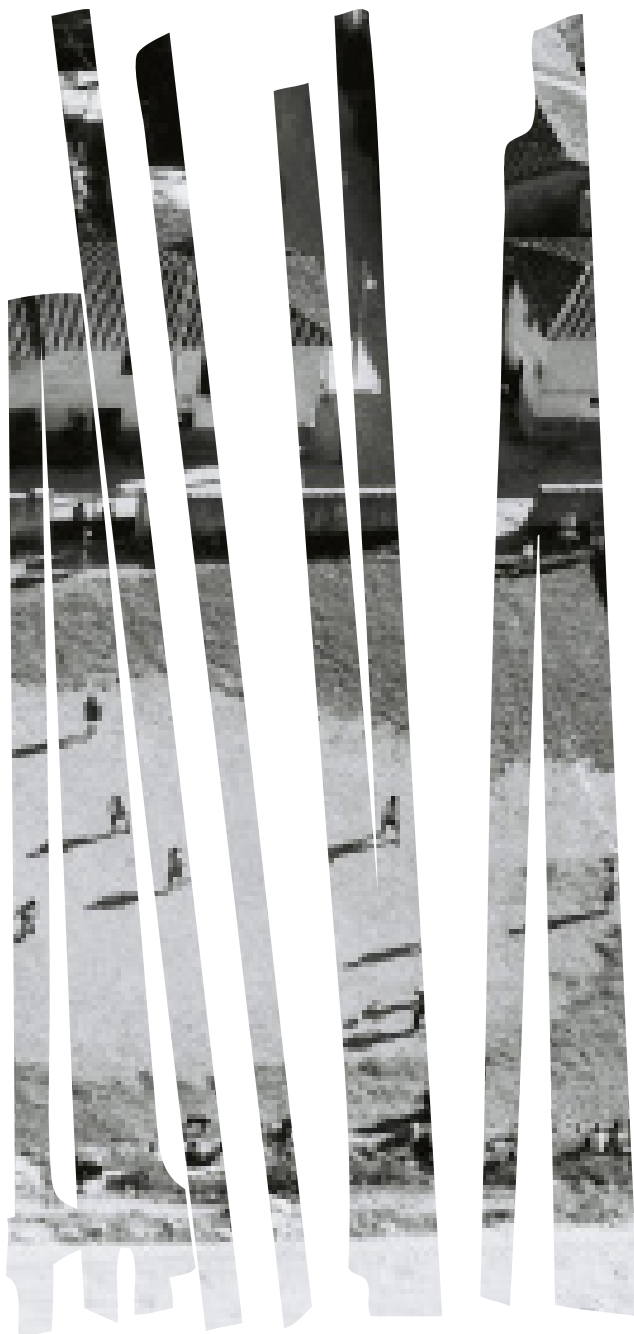


## **Working Paper No. 27, 2020**

# **Physically Close, Socially Distant** Paid Domestic Work and (Dis-)Encounters in Latin America's Private Households Raquel Rojas Scheffer



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## **Physically Close, Socially Distant.**

# **Paid Domestic Work and (Dis-)Encounters in Latin America's Private Households**

Raquel Rojas Scheffer

### **Abstract**

Households that hire domestic workers are a space of compulsive encounters where people of different origins and social class meet, experiencing physical proximity that makes the social distance that prevails between them even more noticeable. Drawing on current research and scholarship on paid domestic work in Latin America, this paper explores the different ways of analysing the encounters of women from highly unequal social positions in the narrowness of the private household, arguing that the combination of physical proximity and affective ties fosters the (re)production of social inequalities and asymmetries of power. But while it is within the convivial relations of these households that inequality becomes evident, it is also there where it can be negotiated, fought, or mitigated. Households that hire domestic workers are thus a privileged site for observing negotiations and disputes concerning social inequalities, and hence, a critical context to study the reciprocal constitution of conviviality and inequality.

**Keywords:** domestic work | household | conviviality | inequalities | Latin America

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## 1. Introduction

A household is, in general terms, defined as a private space where a group of people – mostly, although not exclusively, members of a family – live and interact with each other on a more or less daily basis.<sup>1</sup> The fact that the household is used as a basic unit of analysis in many social, microeconomic, and government models implies that it is seen as a unity, as a space that brings together people that share a similar position in society. Yet paid domestic work, one of the most common occupations for women in Latin America (Blofield 2012; Rodgers 2009; Valenzuela 2012), interrupts this homogeneity by inserting an outsider into the household. In fact, authors analysing the relationships around this occupation have stated that paid domestic work “entails a unique physical proximity of bodies from different class groups” (Casanova 2013: 562), which makes it “one of the most paradigmatic forms of contact between the working class and the middle and upper classes” (Gorbán and Tizziani 2014: 54).

Domestic work has historically been perceived as women’s terrain and naturalized as an activity that women can do because of their “innate caring faculties” (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez and Brites 2014: 1). By this logic, domestic tasks would not require any specific qualifications, being thus considered inferior to other forms of work (Chaney and García Castro 1989; Federici 2004; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010). As a result, domestic workers tend to be immersed in precarious, abusive, and exploitative work conditions, with long working hours, low wages, and high levels of informality (ILO 2015a, 2017). Furthermore, the dynamics around paid domestic work are marked by asymmetries: women that can outsource domestic chores do so to devote their time to better valued or more pleasurable activities, while the women employed as domestic workers are those who could not find a better paying job or a position with better working conditions, due to their lack of training and experience or their young age (Anderson 2000; Blofield 2012; Duarte 1993; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010, 2013; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Jelin 1977; Rollins 1985).

In this paper, I consider households that hire domestic workers as a space of compulsive encounters (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010; Wasser 2018), as a site where women of different origin and social class that share expectations around domestic work meet, experiencing physical proximity that would otherwise be rare and that makes the social distance that prevails between them even more noticeable.<sup>2</sup> I am particularly interested

1 This way of understanding households draws on governmental and statistical definitions, for instance, the one for the European Union (EUROSTAT 2017). That said, it should be noted that the definition of household – as well as of family – is inevitably time- and space-bound, and it depends on the political, social, economic and technological characteristics of the analyzed context. For a discussion of the Latin American case, with a focus on Argentina, see Jelin 2010.

2 As Gutiérrez-Rodríguez states: “Their neighborhoods [of domestic workers and their employers] are divided by ‘colour’ and ‘class’ lines. Their children usually do not frequent the same schools and their friendship circles do not overlap” (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010: 10).

in the nexus between convivial relations and asymmetries of power characteristic of this employment relation. Starting from the concept of conviviality coined by the Maria Sibylla Merian International Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences *Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America*, I seek to highlight the “forms of living together in contexts characterized by profound inequalities as well as persistent intercultural, interreligious, interethnic and gender tensions” (Mecila 2017: 2). I argue that households that hire domestic workers are a privileged site for observing everyday interactions, negotiations, and disputes concerning social inequalities, and thus, a key context to study the reciprocal constitution between conviviality and inequality (Costa 2019).

Drawing on current research and scholarship on paid domestic work in Latin America, this paper explores the different ways of analysing the encounters of women from highly unequal social positions in the narrowness of the private household. I start by discussing the historical attribution of the household and its chores as women’s terrain, an idea that perpetuated the sexual division of labour and the devaluation of domestic work. This section also highlights the process by which social inequalities create both the demand for and the supply of domestic work, making households that hire domestic workers a site of asymmetrical encounters.

Subsequently, I describe how the history of domestic work and colonialization are intertwined, discussing the reasons for such a high incidence of this occupation in Latin America. Even if an analysis of this region as a compact and homogeneous unit is impossible, this section seeks to point out trends, changes, and continuities regarding paid domestic work.

The fourth section presents a review of the current research on paid domestic work in Latin America, focusing on the ways of living together between workers and employers. To organize the discussion, I introduce subsections that explore models of conviviality in different dimensions. Based on the publications reviewed for this paper, I organize my analysis around different lines that, although presented interwoven in the daily experiences of domestic workers and their employers, are addressed separately for analytical purposes.

Finally, the last section wraps up the discussion pointing out that households that hire domestic workers should be seen not as a site where different actors live together despite inequalities, but precisely because of them. It is the physical proximity of unequal actors, combined with affective ties, which fosters the (re)production of social inequalities and asymmetries of power. At the same time, while it is within the convivial relations of these households that inequality becomes evident, it is also there where it can be negotiated, fought, or mitigated.

## 2. The Household as a Site of Asymmetrical Encounters

The idea of the household as a physical space separated from the workplace has not always been the prevailing one. As Jelin (2010: 49) points out, in western societies, this division stems from the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of the factory as a site for production, which led to the construction of two distinct social spheres: the world of work and the world of family. These spheres were presented as a male and a female domain respectively, with the man acting as the economic provider – the “breadwinner” – and the woman responsible for domestic and care work.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, this gendered division of labour not only determines differences in the allocation of responsibilities and the scope of execution of activities but also creates distinctions based on gender in terms of access to rights, rewards, and power (Acker 2004), attributing value to the work performed in the public sphere – which deserves a wage – while denying it to the other.

Despite changes in the economy and the fluidity of family relations, the allocation of responsibilities within the household has remained remarkably stable. In Latin America, the participation of women in the labour force has increased significantly over the last century, particularly since 1960 (Jelin 2010: 60), making the incidence of dual-earner families and female-headed households also more significant. Yet irrespective of the global growth of female participation in employment, women still perform at least two and a half times more unpaid household and care work than men, and the gap gets much broader in so-called developing countries (ILO 2016: 19-20). This situation has been analysed by different authors (Anderson 2000; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010, 2013; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001) who point out that even when women have a paid job in the public sphere of the labour market, chores such as cleaning, washing, cooking, or taking care of other people continue to be seen as their responsibility, perpetuating the unequal distribution of tasks within the household. And while more affluent households opt to employ another person to deliver this work, this produces a double workload (Carrasco 2003; Federici 2013; Jelin 2010; Peredo Beltrán 2003) on women that cannot outsource their own domestic duties.

However, even when someone is hired to carry out this work, its feminine ascription remains. Many studies have highlighted that when both partners are inserted in the labour market and a third person is hired to take over the domestic duties, the woman of the household is still in charge of organizing, managing and supervising these tasks, which are, in turn, performed by another woman. Furthermore, this woman

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3 Yet far from being two separate dimensions, the organization of the household and of production are intertwined, as feminist studies from the 1970s on have argued. In this line, authors like Dalla Costa and James (1975) and Federici (1975, 2004) state that the activities carried out in the household are an integral (although invisible) part of wage or “productive” labour.



frequently belongs to an economically, racially, ethnically, or religious subordinated social group (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010, 2013; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Lan 2006; Rollins 1985; Romero 2002). This means that the inequality in the distribution of responsibilities regarding domestic tasks and care work in the household is not resolved through negotiation between its members – for instance, a more equitable distribution between women and men – but is settled with an arrangement based not only on gender differences but also on class, racial, ethnic, and citizenship divides. The gender specificity of domestic work remains, while new social divides are incorporated within the household (Anderson 2000; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010; Hochschild 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Lan 2006; Skornia 2014).

Paid domestic work and social inequalities are deeply intertwined. According to Blofield, this occupation is “a by-product of highly unequal societies” (Blofield 2012: 1) that creates both the demand for the outsourcing of domestic activities and a ready supply of inexpensive labour for the occupation. Households from middle and upper classes are the ones that have enough income to outsource domestic work, while the women employed as domestic workers are those who could not find a better paying job or a position with better working conditions due to their lack of training and limited formal education. The fact that the encounter between domestic workers and their employers takes place in the narrowness of the private household makes the inequalities between them even more evident.

In this vein, Gutiérrez-Rodríguez (2010: 9) states that private households that employ domestic workers represent sites of “transcultural conviviality” where two social groups that usually live in segregated spaces meet and negotiate social boundaries, immersed in highly asymmetrical relations. While Gutiérrez-Rodríguez focuses on encounters between migrant Latin American workers and their employers in Europe, introducing thus a transregional aspect in the analysis, in this paper I focus on Latin American families that outsource domestic work to other women, either migrants or not, arguing that asymmetries based on gender, class, and “race” or ethnicity are present in these households’ dynamics regardless of the citizenship aspect.

Conviviality, as understood by Mecila (2017), refers to the ways of living together in contexts characterized by social inequality and diversity, where everyday interactions can be analysed as processes of negotiation of differences and disputes concerning social inequalities. Moreover, conviviality and inequality are not only interrelated but are reciprocally constituted, insofar as inequality is a relational concept that “assumes meaning and consequences in the realm of conviviality, that is, in the context of social interactions which, in turn, reflect existing inequalities” (Costa 2019: 28). Conviviality and inequality are thus two sides of the same coin. Following this logic, I argue that the private household is a privileged site for observing the reciprocal constitution between



conviviality and inequality. By exploring the dynamics of intimacy between domestic workers and their employers, I consider domestic work as a site of negotiation of inequalities and social boundaries, which in turn reflect broader dynamics of inclusion and exclusion based on gender, class, “race”, ethnicity, and citizenship regimes.

### **3. Paid Domestic Work in Latin America: Trends, Changes, and Continuities**

In her *History of Domestic Service in Spanish America*, Kuznesof (1989: 17) states that the emergence of this occupation in the region “coincides with the beginning of Spanish colonization”. Hoerder (2015) agrees with that claim, arguing that the introduction of domestic work is linked to the history of conquest and colonization since the Spaniards and Portuguese brought with them the concepts of gender relations and dishonour that define domestic work until today. Along the same lines, different studies state that the link between colonialism and domestic work is still visible today, either through the significant incidence of this occupation in states that were part of the imperial/colonial relation (Higman 2015), because the migratory routes of domestic workers today reflect colonial ties of the past (Higman 2015; Meerkerk, Neunsinger and Hoerder 2015), or because racial and gender hierarchies that gave rise to this occupation continue to be reproduced (Cumes Simón 2014; Haskins and Lowrie 2015; Hoerder 2015; Kuznesof 1989). Similarly, Valiente (2005: 82) states that the low level of legal protection guaranteed to domestic workers has its roots in the process of domestication of slave labour at the beginning of the Hispanic period.

Precisely because of the colonial roots of domestic work, some authors have seen this occupation as an “anachronism in the modern age” (Kuznesof 1989: 32), an activity “destined to disappear” (see discussions in Higman 2015; Sarti 2014). But this prediction is far from being fulfilled. The International Labour Organization (ILO 2015a: 53) estimates that in Latin America, around 18 million people are engaged in domestic work as their main economic activity. This corresponds to approximately 7% of the workforce in the region and 14.3% of economically active women. And while these numbers seem high, they most probably underestimate the true magnitude of the phenomenon, due to the difficulty in defining such a heterogeneous occupational group, making it highly complicated to obtain consistent results when applying surveys. For instance, it is common for domestic workers who work on a daily or hourly basis to be mistakenly considered self-employed (Valenzuela 2012: 59). However, the cause of this underestimation is not only technical. Since this occupation is not always seen as work, domestic workers are often not recognized as such, but are instead considered a relative that helps with domestic chores (Valenzuela 2012: 59). And since significant

percentages of undocumented migrants and even minors work in this sector, registration is, in many cases, intentionally avoided.

That said, there is no doubt that domestic work is one of the main economic activities for women in the region (Rodgers 2009; Valenzuela 2012), particularly for those coming from low-income sectors (Gorbán 2012). Moreover, according to the ILO (2015a: 53), Latin America – together with Asia – concentrates the highest proportion of domestic workers globally. But why is this occupation so prevalent in this region? The dynamics between supply and demand of domestic work based on unequal relations – where higher-income households have the resources to hire domestic workers, while people from lower social classes are willing to accept this job despite scarce labour rights and low pay – is observed globally. However, what exacerbates the incidence of domestic work in Latin America is the lack of other options to alleviate deficits in the care regime – particularly in what refers to the care of pre-school-age children and the elderly – coupled with the persistence of a patriarchal culture that hampers more equal distribution of household work within the family.

When discussing care regimes and their organization, the role of institutions such as the family, the state, and the market is crucial (Esquivel, Faur and Jelin 2012). Also, a not-for-profit sector, based on community support or volunteers can be included in that list (Razavi 2007). In Latin America, there is a prolonged absence of state services that provide support or take care of children or people who cannot fend for themselves (Soto et al. 2016: 19). Therefore, to reconcile work and household responsibilities, Latin American families – and more specifically, women in Latin American families – have relied either on the market (when they can afford it) or on informal community networks (Blofield 2012: 14-15; Esquivel, Faur and Jelin 2012: 24; Razavi 2007: 17). Day-care centres are one of the alternatives mediated by the market. Still, these are generally expensive and do not offer an extended schedule to allow parents to work a full day. Against this background – and the supply of cheap domestic labour – middle and upper classes have traditionally chosen to hire domestic workers who, in addition to looking after children and people that cannot fend for themselves, tend to do the cleaning, cooking, and everything related to household maintenance.<sup>4</sup>

The delegation of housework to other women is thus a common practice in Latin America. But while some factors have remained surprisingly stable over time – for instance, the ethnic or racial characteristics of women delivering this work – other

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4 Beyond economic efficiency, there are other rather symbolic reasons why middle and upper classes prefer this option. In this regard, hiring a domestic worker affirms the social status of the household by showing that it occupies an advantageous position in the social structure in comparison to other families that cannot outsource household chores (Costa 2018: 187; Gill 1994: 51).

elements have changed.<sup>5</sup> This is the case of the work modality, which is gradually moving away from the “live-in” model, giving rise to a greater incidence of “live-out” domestic workers (Blofield 2012: 27; Hobden 2013; Valenzuela 2012: 61-62). The age of domestic workers has also been increasing, with a regional average of around 40 years old (Valenzuela 2012: 62). This increase is related to the expansion of educational coverage, which leads to a longer permanence of women in formal education institutions and delays their entry into the labour market. According to the ILO (ILO 2015a: 54), while in 2003 only 21.8% of domestic workers in Latin America had finished high school, the percentage rose to 33.3% in 2013. However, it is known that the presence of children and young people in this sector is more significant in countries that have a higher incidence of poverty. Although it is difficult to accurately measure the number of children performing domestic labour, official data estimate that there are more than two million children in this occupation. Among those, more than 90% are girls (ILO 2011: 2).

Unlike Europe, the United States, or Canada, in Latin America most domestic workers are national citizens. Inequality is high within this region (ECLAC 2017: 47, 2018: 42), generating enough supply to meet the demand for domestic work. Thus, while migrants represent 4.4% of domestic workers in Latin America, this proportion rises to 65.8% in European countries (excluding Eastern Europe), and to 71% in North America (ILO 2015b: 18). Only some Latin American countries – Chile, Costa Rica, and Argentina – have a significant proportion of migrant domestic workers, which is related to their more favourable economic position compared to their neighbours (Soto et al. 2016).

At a legal level, domestic work has long been pushed into the background when discussing labour codes. Just a couple of decades ago, if labour laws addressed domestic work at all, it was only to mandate lower salaries and benefits, as well as longer working hours (Barbagelata 1978; Kuznesof 1989; Valiente 2010, 2016). Things started to change since the mid-2000s when many Latin American countries – and some from other regions – modified their laws to guarantee more rights to this sector of the working force. Many years of hard work organizing at local, national, and international levels were vital to accomplish these changes (see Boris and Fish 2014, 2015; Goldsmith 2013a; Mather 2013; Pape 2016). That said, the resulting situation varies from country to country, since in many cases differences in terms of wages, working hours, or access to retirement and other social security benefits persist (see Soto 2017), and even where domestic workers are legally guaranteed the same rights as any other wage worker, enforcing the law remains a major challenge. Yet regardless of national specificities, the overall balance is positive: domestic workers have gained

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5 To this day, in areas where the population of indigenous people or Afro-descendants is elevated, these tend to be overrepresented among domestic workers (ILO 2015a: 54).

more rights throughout the region. An element that marked a turning point in this respect was the discussion and later adoption of the ILO Convention No. 189, concerning decent work for domestic workers (Pape 2016; Poblete 2018). This regulation not only represented a milestone for the sector but also gave a strong impetus to organisations of domestic workers and their advocates, providing a legitimized discourse and helping them to gain recognition at the national level (Rojas Scheffer 2018, 2019).

Since this paper focuses on the current literature – from 2000 onwards – convivial relations around paid domestic work are marked by the aforementioned legal changes. In this respect, the official recognition of domestic work as work, and as such, as deserving of labour rights, entails a change in regime that affects the character of the nexus between inequality and conviviality (Costa 2019: 31). That said, this does not mean that a new legal order directly affects the dynamics that characterize this occupation. Still, it provides a new framework to organize the worker-employer relationship and demand better working conditions. In this regard, considering the Brazilian case, Vidal (2008, 2012) points out that for a growing number of domestic workers the definition of a good employer has changed, going beyond the traditional understanding of someone that treats their employees with consideration, is polite, and helps the worker in times in need; now a good employer should also grant labour rights.

#### **4. Conviviality in Private Households that Hire Domestic Workers**

From the previous section, it follows that it is not possible to analyse Latin America as a homogeneous region: each country has its laws and characteristics regarding paid domestic work. Nevertheless, some similarities cut across all of them, like the high incidence of domestic employment throughout history, the gender, class, and ethnic affiliation of those performing this occupation, and the wave of legal changes that affected the whole region. These similarities provide common ground to explore the asymmetrical yet close relationships between domestic workers and their employers.

Another similarity throughout Latin America is the increase in academic interest in domestic work since the early 2000s. Indeed, this does not mean that this is an entirely new subject, but rather that the scope of academic publications around it expanded in the last decades, going beyond the field of feminist studies to include broader statistical, historical, ethnographical, legal, and organizational perspectives, among others (see Brites 2013). The literature reviewed in this paper is part of this new wave of academic research on domestic labour, with a particular focus on paid domestic work. It is not my intention to present an exhaustive review on all themes, authors, or perspectives that address this working relationship, but rather to focus on those that provide a more

in-depth insight into the encounters of people from highly unequal positions in the narrowness of the private household. Although the authors do not necessarily draw on the concept of conviviality, they do analyse the ways of living together between employers and workers, highlighting the tensions and ambivalent dynamics that these (dis-)encounters produce.

Hiring a domestic worker makes employers' daily life more manageable: she does not only keep the household cleaner, making it more enjoyable to live in, but her work also reduces – or even eliminates – conflicts around the distribution of domestic chores between family members (Anderson 2000; Monticelli 2017; Rojas García and Toledo González 2014). Her presence as a stranger in the household, however, poses some threats in the eyes of employers, so much that they are regarded as “intimate enemies” (Peñaranda et al. 2006: 45), “paid enemies” (Belarmino de Freitas 2014: 201), “the enemy within” (Cumes Simón 2014: 261) or a “necessary evil” (Gorbán 2012; 2015: 13; Torres 2018). Within this framework, the following subsections discuss the strategies both parties adopt to cope with this situation of physical closeness across social classes, learning how to live together while either enhancing or undermining distinctions between them.

While the literature on other contexts identifies different domains of observation of conviviality – for instance, labour relations, family and kinship, and public spaces (Góngora Mera, Vera Santos and Costa 2019) – all these aspects are intermixed in the case of households that hire domestic workers. Private and public spaces overlap when the private household, perceived as a “safe haven” by its members (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010: 10), is at the same time the site of employment for a domestic worker that, to a greater or lesser extent, can require the fulfilment of her labour rights. The private home becomes thus a workplace for domestic workers, challenging the dichotomies between workplace and home, public and private (Lan 2006: 19), and “confus[ing] and complicat[ing] the conceptual divide between family and work, custom and contract, affection and duty, the home and the world” (Qayum and Ray 2003: 521). This overlap requires a different organization of the analysis, one that stems from the particularities of the context.

#### **4.1 Between Family, Friendship, and Work**

The very nature of domestic and care work and the fact that it takes place in the intimacy of the domestic sphere makes the relationship between worker and employer particularly close, giving rise to affective and emotional interactions. Moreover, even if the worker would prefer not to take part in the intimate relations of the household

members, she becomes involved in them “purely by inhabiting the space” (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2014: 47).

In this work setting, where family life and workplace get intermixed, it is rather common for employers to claim that the domestic worker is “just like one of the family”. This discourse has been widely analysed, in different times and places, always getting pretty much to the same conclusion: it produces and reinforces asymmetrical power relations between workers and employers.<sup>6</sup> In this vein, Young (1987) points out that the conception of domestic workers as “daughters” rests on paternalistic relationships that fail to recognize the worker as a person with labour or individual rights (particularly sexual and reproductive rights), even in the case of adult workers. Furthermore, this paternalistic discourse can be regarded as a strategy to reinforce the worker’s dependence and secure her continued “devotion” to the family. Even if Young’s text was published more than 30 years ago and addresses primarily the situation of young women that migrated from rural areas in Peru to start their first job in urban households, several of its points continue to be addressed in current analyses.

Writing almost fifteen years later and focusing on Brazil, Kofes (2001) sees this discourse as an ideological mechanism that makes it easier for family members – particularly for the female employer – to come to terms with the presence of a “stranger” in the privacy of their household. What is more, alluding to family-like relationships, employers can maximize the labour extracted from the worker, while legitimizing the absence of labour rights. Referring to the reception of the ILO Convention No. 189 in Mexico, Durin (2013: 123) highlights how the enunciation of family ties is used to deny basic human labour rights to domestic workers. When the employment status is hidden behind the family metaphor, negotiating better working conditions becomes challenging, since obligations appear mixed with family loyalties or responsibilities carried out “for love”, rather than for a wage and under the terms of a labour contract.

Despite the negative effects that the allusion to the family can have on the recognition and enjoyment of labour rights, some workers seem to long for it. Peñaranda et al. (2006), who focus on domestic workers’ experiences in Sucre (Bolivia), point out that since these women tend to have a restricted social life – a situation that gets exacerbated in the case of live-in workers – personal and affective relationships in the workplace play a major role in their emotional wellbeing. Similarly, when analysing the trajectories of migrant women in domestic service in Argentina, Courtis and Pacecca (2014) found that when their interviewees evaluated their work conditions in positive terms, they tended not to mention the contractual relationship itself, but rather personal

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6 See Bunster and Chaney (1985), Young (1987) and Gill (1994) on Latin America, Rollins (1985) and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) on the United States, Parreñas Salazar (2015) on the United States and Europe, Lan (2006) in Taiwan, and Fish (2006) on South Africa.



interactions that were usually summarized as their being treated “just like a family member”. The same logic applied to those that declared not to be satisfied with their work experience, since complaints about poor working conditions, low wages, or long working hours were not on the top of the list, giving more importance to interpersonal relations. The research of Canevaro (2014) on women that take care of children in Buenos Aires insists on this point, claiming that the intensity and closeness of the relationship these women develop with the kids in their care make them, in many cases, evaluate their labour relation in terms of family and kinship ties. In the same vein, Brites (2007) found out that the close ties that develop within this occupation are often the reason why workers decide not to change jobs despite low pay or bad working conditions, and Vidal (2012) reports that domestic workers interviewed during his fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) declared to have accepted poor work conditions and not demand their rights as an expression of gratitude to employers that helped them in times of need.

The family discourse can also be appropriated by domestic workers to their benefit. According to Kofes (2001: 179), intimacy and close relationships could help the workers obtain (material) support in case of need in a way that would otherwise be inaccessible, while Canevaro (2014) and Durin (2013) highlight the importance of the symbolic resources that being treated as “part of the family” implies for the worker. Peñaranda et al. (2006) point out that many workers make conscious efforts to win the affection of their employers as a strategy to be treated better, obtaining further benefits such as higher pay or permission to go out on Sundays. This ultimately shows that the improvement of working conditions depends not so much on legal or economic factors, but instead on affective or paternalistic aspects that view a domestic worker as someone who has to earn the respect and guarantees that should be granted to every worker.

Following a similar logic, the close relationship that tends to develop between the domestic worker and her employers is often referred to as friendship (Kofes 2001; Vidal 2007, 2012). This situation is particularly prevalent in the case of the female employer since, as discussed earlier, both women are affected by gender dynamics that ascribe the responsibility of domestic chores to them. This friendship, however, does not suppress the inequality that characterizes their relationship. The work of Vidal (2007; 2012) discusses this issue in an in-depth and detailed manner, highlighting that while domestic workers and employers both have the same desire for consideration and affection, their friendship nevertheless means something different for one and the other. The domestic worker sees this relationship primarily as acknowledging their similarities in humanity, expecting to receive help in case of difficulties. The employer, on the other hand, considers it as a warranty of loyalty, trust, and discretion, without



renouncing to the idea of a radical difference between the parties (Vidal 2012: 143). The resulting relationship then, even if called friendship, is still established hierarchically. This dynamic is also pointed out by Pereyra (2013) in her exploratory study with female employers in Buenos Aires. Analysing group interviews with employers with different profiles, Pereyra presents a typology to describe the various ties these women develop with their domestic employees, alternating between friendly, protective, or hierarchical relationships. The author concludes that even in cases where the labour relation is identified as friendly or protective at first glance, a hierarchical component is always present (Pereyra 2013: 59).

The domestic worker appears thus located in the convergence of affection and duty, in constant tension between family loyalties and legal rights. Her relationship to the members of the household goes beyond a labour contract, but not far enough for her to be considered a full member of the family. And while some discursive practices – articulated by both worker and employer – seek to reduce the gap that separates them, highlighting their similarities and common experiences, other dynamics that take place simultaneously have the opposite effect.

## 4.2 “Knowing Your Place”

Precisely because of the physical closeness and affective ties that tend to emerge between the worker and the family she works for, employers feel many times the need to highlight boundaries to keep the social distance between those involved in this labour relationship. This distance is particularly relevant for the female employer, as Kofes (2001: 43) points out, because in her case this duplication of roles is particularly threatening. Domestic workers are thus expected to respect a problematic separation, performing functions that are traditionally seen as the responsibility of the family’s mother, while at the same time not confusing their social role with that of the mistress.

In this regard, many employers point out that one of the most essential features of a good domestic worker is “knowing her place” which, according to Gorbán and Tizziani (2014: 60), expresses precisely the fear of “dislocation of roles in the employer-employee relationship”. Analysing interviews performed with female employers in Buenos Aires, these authors find that domestic workers that “know their place” are those that “play their part” in the hierarchical dynamics that characterize this work arrangement, assuming a place of inferiority in relation to their employers, who see themselves as socially and morally superior. Domestic workers are thus expected to uphold a convenient social distance, even if the daily coexistence makes this extremely difficult. A worker that challenges the superior position of the employer is branded as a *desubicada* (out of place) or *igualada* (someone that wants to be equal to those

of a higher social position), and this behaviour is not tolerated because it threatens the hierarchy that lies at the very core of this relationship.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, Gorbán and Tizziani argue, discourses of social inferiority are necessary as a means to highlight the difference between employers and workers, while at the same time justifying the asymmetries that characterize their relationship.

In their study on domestic workers' social representation in Bolivia, Peñaranda et al. (2006: 52) also explore employers' need to mark and keep distance using spatial references, such as *cada quien tiene su lugar* (everyone has their place). By doing so, they not only show who is the mistress and who is the employee but also reinforce their identity as members of a dominant class and culture. Particularly in the case of Bolivia, where domestic workers typically migrate from rural to urban areas and tend to be of indigenous descent, the employment relationship that emerges is one of domination and superiority, based on ethnic discrimination and intertwined with class (and gender) inequalities (Peñaranda et al. 2006: 15). The standard image of domestic workers as dirty, lazy, untruthful, and irresponsible (Peñaranda et al. 2006: 43) leads to an essentialist view of these women that casts them as inferior. In this context, the hierarchical employer-worker relation goes beyond a strict labour framework, contributing to preserving the social order and maintaining ethnic (and class) domination structures.

The metaphor of being "out of place" can also be taken in a more literal way. In this respect, different authors have analysed the organization of space in households that hire domestic workers, finding strict lines that divide the places where the worker is allowed, and those where her presence is forbidden or only tolerated when she is serving their employers. Most households have segregated areas considered "the maid's bathroom" or "the maid's room" that, despite being attributed to the worker, are far from being spaces where her intimacy and individuality are respected. For instance, these rooms tend to be cramped and filled with cleaning utensils like brooms, buckets, or anything that the employers want to keep out of their sight. In an inversed logic, there are also areas of the household where the worker is "out of place", like the family dining table, their bathrooms, the living room, or the pool. These segregation practices resonate with similar ones implemented during the slavery period, as some domestic workers interviewed in Brazil by Bernardino-Costa (2014) point out. According to this author, there is evidence that paid domestic work retained concrete traces of slavery after its abolition in Brazil in 1888. And even in countries where slavery was not such a prominent institution, these practices are common and also related to ethnic or "racial" differences, as research in Bolivia (Peñaranda et al. 2006), Guatemala (Cumes Simón 2014) or Mexico (Camus and O 2014, Durin 2013) have highlighted.

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7 See also the work of Cumes Simón (2014) on paid domestic work in Guatemala.

Brites' (2007, 2014) analysis of paid domestic work in different regions of Brazil (Espírito Santo, Minas Gerais, and Rio Grande do Sul) points out that practices of spatial segregation, internalized and naturalized at an early age, can be understood as a way of teaching social distance. This author starts by asking herself why, if there is so much affection and intimacy between children and the domestic worker that takes care of them, these children grow up to perpetuate the rigid hierarchies that separate employers from workers. Brites comes to the conclusion that even if employers do not treat domestic workers rudely, their children learn about social distance and class differences through other channels. The organization of domestic space appears as one of the primary mechanisms that reproduce asymmetries, and one that even five-year-olds seem to understand and apprehend. Drawing on different interviews and conversations carried out during her fieldwork, many with young children, Brites (2007: 106) argues that it is through the way workers occupy the space in the household that children are taught to see inequalities as natural, learning to combine affection and social distance in a way that does not seem contradictory.

Marking social distances does not necessarily mean treating domestic workers without consideration. The relationship can still be cordial, establishing an asymmetrical reciprocity that, far from instituting horizontality, actually expresses social hierarchy. Within this framework, the extra-salary benefits that domestic workers usually get (for example, clothing or household items that their employers no longer use) reinforce their place of inferiority in relation to the person offering the gifts (Brites 2014: 67), giving rise to a "stratified complementarity" (Brites 2014: 63) that makes domestic work functional for both parties, while reinforcing social hierarchies.

### 4.3 Marking the Foreign Body

The unequal relations between workers and employers is also manifest in and on bodies, as Casanova (2013) points out, and can be observed particularly in interactions around health, food, and appearance and clothing. Analysing a society like the Ecuadorian, where the majority of the population could be described as *mestiza*, Casanova explains that unlike other cases where racial differences between employers and workers are easily visible to the naked eye, this is not the rule in Ecuador.<sup>8</sup> In this context, the uniform appears as the "obvious means" for marking and distinguishing the bodies of domestic workers.

Domestic workers interviewed by Casanova declare uniforms to be "humiliating", "a piece of trash" or "sad dresses" required only to make a clear distinction of "who is the

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<sup>8</sup> That said, Casanova points out that "identifications of 'race' and class in Ecuador are somewhat fluid and mutually constituted: mestizos with higher class status are perceived (and see themselves) as whiter than poorer mestizos, regardless of phenotype" (Casanova 2013: 58).

employee and who is the boss” (Casanova 2013: 575-576). Yet these women do not only refer to feelings of inferiority or embarrassment when wearing uniforms. They also point out that these are uncomfortable, poorly made out of low-quality fabric, making them counter-productive insofar as they limit movement and restrict the workers’ capacity to deliver their work. In this respect, domestic workers could only find two reasons why employers make them wear a uniform: to mark their low social status and to desexualize their bodies in an effort to manage the “sexual threat posed by the presence of an unrelated female in the home of a married couple” (Casanova 2013: 578). Similarly, Gorbán (2012) describes uniforms as a boundary that separates those who belong to the family from those who do not, marking the body of the domestic worker and pointing it as a foreign element within the household. Uniforms appear as a control mechanism and as the very embodiment of inequality.

Other practices also make it clear that not all bodies carry the same amount of social worth. These repertoires vary from not being allowed to visit the doctor, or employers not taking seriously their employee’s health condition, to being offered different or less food, or – as already mentioned – having to eat separately from their employers, many times in the kitchen or in small, cramped places. In a text from 2013, Gorbán analyses the role of food in the configuration of the employer-employee relationship, focusing on the way the demarcation of limits regarding the access to food is intertwined with the construction and legitimation of social hierarchies. In this vein, establishing differences regarding the type of food or place to eat, employers reinforce their employee’s inferiority and their own superiority. Furthermore, in some cases, domestic workers are even forced to use different dishes and utensils, as if they could transmit diseases.<sup>9</sup>

The organization of the domestic space previously discussed can be seen as a way to try to separate the domestic worker’s body from areas that are considered “clean” and for the sole enjoyment of the employers and their children. In this vein, Brites (2014: 67) refers to the domestic worker’s body as an “ambiguous dimension”, insofar as she can hold a baby in her arms, cook for the family, clean and wash clothes, but should not dine with the family or sit on their living room’s couch. Often, the prejudice of domestic workers’ bad personal hygiene or promiscuous life creates an image of her body as a possible vector of illnesses. The paradox is that while household members rely on the domestic worker to live in a clean environment, her body is seen as something that “pollutes” the cleanliness of the household when she is not “performing servile activities” (Brites 2014: 67). As one of the workers interviewed in Sucre by Peñaranda et al. (2006) said:

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9 See also Belarmino de Freitas (2014), Cumes Simón (2014) and Gorbán (2012).

They [the employers] think we carry diseases. They are disgusted by us, that's why they don't want us to eat with them, let alone use their plates or cups. But I don't understand, if we cook with our own hands (Peñaranda et al. 2006: 44).<sup>10</sup>

These practices are lived as hurtful and humiliating situations. But other more subtle mechanisms have the same effect, such as not recognizing them as workers, referring to them rather as “a person that helps” or “someone that stays at home”. Gorbán and Tizziani (2014: 58) reveal a double operation in the discourse of employers that at first declare to have hired a domestic worker because the household workload was overwhelming, but that later when someone else delivers this work, perceive it as less complicated or necessary. The same activity is represented dually, and value is attributed differently according to who performs it. It is not that the domestic tasks themselves are undervalued, Gorbán and Tizziani say, but instead the person hired to carry them out. Peñaranda et al. (2006) also point out this contradiction in the perception of the value of domestic labour. Furthermore, many employers stress that it is important for domestic workers not to know how essential they are; otherwise, they would take advantage of the situation, defying employers' authority (Peñaranda et al. 2006: 42).

#### **4.4 Theft, Access to Justice, and Acts of Resistance**

In a context in which women from lower social classes spend most of their day surrounded by abundance in a way they will probably never experience in their own households, theft emerges as one of the major threats mentioned by employers. As Brites (2014: 68) points out, even if lost objects are often found, “the underlying belief is that domestic workers obviously steal”. In the same vein, in her article about theft and domestic service in Mar del Plata (Argentina), Pérez (2016) points out that throughout the 20th century the image of the *sirvienta ladrona* (thieving maid) was part of the employers' collective imaginary, regardless of their own experiences.

After hearing many stories of theft from employers and workers alike, Brites concludes that this recurrent accusation has the symbolic effect of reaffirming the workers' position as a stranger in the home since theft between family members is regarded as nearly impossible. The domestic worker is thus labelled as a dangerous element within the household, a “polluter” (Brites 2014: 68). On the other hand, the fact that the worker is the recurrent prime suspect in case of lost objects, could be seen as a tacit acknowledgment of the opposite positions that workers and employers assume in the social structure. Within this framework, theft is seen as “a predictable action”, as

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<sup>10</sup> Author's translation. Original in Spanish: “*Piensan que tenemos enfermedades. Los patrones nos asquean, por eso no quieren que comamos con ellos y menos en sus platos o sus tazas, pero yo no entiendo, si cocinamos con nuestras mismas manos*”.

something “inherent in the relation of social inequality” (Brites 2014: 69). Gorbán and Tizziani (2014: 60) also stress that “the suspicion of theft seems to be an integral link between employers and workers”, which stems from the workers’ “humble origins” and the contrasting wealthy households where they work. As Brites, these authors read the employers’ fear of theft as acknowledging the asymmetries and inequalities between the parties involved in the labour relationship. Yet, at the same time, they identify this discourse as a way of reproducing and reaffirming the social inferiority of domestic workers.

Faced with the threat of theft, employers take action to mitigate it, developing practices to control their assets by reducing the access of workers to some areas of the household, or implementing control strategies over them. The increasing use of (hidden) video cameras should be interpreted in this context. In her research in Monterrey, México, Durin (2013) reports the oppressive feeling described by domestic workers that knew they were being monitored at all times. Durin also describes a public initiative that intended to carry out a census of domestic workers to establish control and improve security conditions. The fear of the poor, regarded as “potential criminals” (Durin 2013: 117), is identified as the main reason for such measures.

Now, despite the many references to cases of theft, employers rarely take any legal actions, preferring just to end the work relation (Brites 2014; Durin 2013; Pérez 2016). This situation could be interpreted as a “tacit acceptance” of theft (Brites 2014: 68). Or it just may be that replacing a lost object is, in the eyes of the employer, easier than going through a bureaucratic process that involves the police and the legal apparatus (Pérez 2016). However, if employers want to take legal action, they certainly can (Durin 2013).

When domestic workers experience violent or abusive situations, they also tend not to go to the authorities to denounce it. Yet the reason for this is quite different. As Blofield (2012: 75-76), Durin (2013: 108), and Peñaranda et al. (2006: 73-75) explore through statistic data or empirical research, domestic workers that were victims of sexual harassment or abuse prefer not to take actions because experience has taught them that their accusations will not be taken seriously, and what is more, they will be accused of lying. References to workers being fired after complaining to the female employer about the behaviour of her son or husband (Peñaranda et al. 2006), or to employers bribing the legal system to avoid the perpetrators from being judged (Cumes Simón 2014; Durin 2013) highlight the unequal access to justice and the normalization of this situation by both parties. That said, there are situations when domestic workers do take legal actions against their employers, as Canevaro (2015) shows. However, these usually do not include violence, harassment, or abuse, but rather the disregard of labour rights. Furthermore, as Jaramillo (2019) points out, there are many obstacles



that domestic workers – and especially migrant domestic workers – must overcome to search for justice, such as knowing her rights, trusting the justice system, and having the money and time to meet with lawyers and legal counsellors to denounce the abuses.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that domestic workers lack agency or power. Theft can be read as an act of resistance, intending to redistribute goods and satisfy workers' necessities, re-establishing a fairer order (Brites 2014; Pérez 2016). Another practice that seems to offend and upset employers deeply is leaving the workplace without notice (Cumes Simón 2014; Durin 2013; Gorbán 2012; Jaramillo 2019). But these are just some of the most confrontational ways of defying the employers' authority.

<sup>11</sup> Domestic workers also contest employers more subtly, by disregarding their rules about food (Gorbán 2013) and spatial order, or disputing the inferior position in which employers have placed them, challenging the constructed differences that supposedly distinguish them from one another (Gorbán and Tizziani 2014; Pérez 2016).

In a text published in this working paper series, Wasser (2018) highlights that while the emotional surrounding of domestic labour intensifies the hierarchy that prevails between workers and employers, it also allows for moments of resistance against this strict social stratification. In this respect, the author gives the example of domestic workers that, refusing to comply with the contradictory rules that expect them to take care of household members while simultaneously forbidding them to get too close to the role of the mistress and mother of the family, “affectively adopt” the children of the household. Drawing on feminist and queer notions of affect and sexual labour, Wasser sees the possibility of overcoming the restrictions of fixed identities by changing the understanding of social boundaries as unsurmountable, allowing for negotiation and change. This new perspective would enable one to rethink the asymmetrical encounters within domestic labour in a way that highlights the interdependency of the actors involved, fostering solidarity and departing from the dynamics of exclusion.

Ultimately, what these studies point out is that boundaries between workers and employers are constantly negotiated. Both parties activate or react to “demarcation repertoires” (Gorbán 2012) instituted through everyday interactions, seeking either to highlight their similarities or their distance to each other.

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<sup>11</sup> Here I am referring to individual resistance practices, since these are the ones carried out within the private household. Collective resistance practices such as organizing in trade unions are, of course, a valid option and a main way of contesting asymmetries and fighting for better working conditions, as the relatively broad literature about domestic workers' organizations show (see Baptista Canedo 2010; Bernardino-Costa 2007; Blofield 2012; Boris and Fish 2014, 2015; Brenes et al. 2015; Chaney and García Castro 1989; García Castro 1993; Goldsmith 2007, 2010, 2013a, 2013b, 2015; Mather 2013; Orsatti 2010, 2015; Prates 1993; Rojas Scheffer 2018, 2019, 2020; Soto 2014, 2016, 2017).



## 5. Concluding Remarks: Intimate Tensions and the Household as a Political Space

The analysis of current research on paid domestic work in Latin America and the forms of conviviality of those involved in this employment relationship brought to light different practices that domestic workers and their employers implement to face the asymmetries that characterize their interactions.

Contrary to the common assumption that sees the household as an exclusive site of private reproduction, this article identified households that hire domestic workers as a space where not only private and public spheres, but also the different worlds that employers and workers inhabit, overlap. In this context, the household becomes a place of compulsive encounters between people from very different social background and class, giving rise to a “stratified complementarity” (Brites 2014: 63) or an “ideology of complementarity” (Durin 2013: 124) that makes domestic work functional for both parties and justifies its continuity, naturalizing the established order.

The analysis showed several ways of examining the models of conviviality within households that hire domestic workers. Authors from across Latin America, with different perspectives and from various disciplines, might focus on different aspects: the ambiguity of affective ties that tend to emerge between workers and employers, the perception – and construction – of the worker as someone inferior, the use of the domestic space, the rules implemented by employers to keep distance, the typology of employers and the relationship they construct with the worker, etc. Regardless of the particularities of each case, what these studies highlight is that the complex relationship that develops between domestic worker and employer – particularly the female employer – can be summarized in terms of ambiguities and tensions.

Ambiguity appears as a key aspect to describe this relationship because even if outsourcing domestic responsibilities is something craved by the female employer, having a stranger at home can also be viewed as a threat. On the one hand, the domestic worker allows the female employer to devote her time to better valued or more enjoyable activities while reinforcing her higher social status and reducing conflicts among family members. On the other, the idea of the private household as a safe haven disappears, while threats such as theft, sexual competition, and child abuse materialize in the presence of the worker. These risks can be mitigated through surveillance, threats to take legal actions or call the police, and de-sexualizing the domestic workers' body. But these options do not neutralize the unpleasant feeling of having an outsider in the intimacy of the home.

It is in this context that the discourse of family and friendship appears as a means to make the compulsive encounter more bearable. However, this strategy entails other

risks. The intimate nature of domestic work could make the social boundaries that normally separate such different groups of people crumble. This situation invites even more concerns for female employers, who fear domestic workers could take their place as mothers and wives in the family. The relationship between employer and employee is thus marked by a constant tension between dependence and mistrust, in an interplay that seeks a difficult balance between proximity and distance. Workers are expected to “know their place”, delivering care work without confusing their role with that of the mistress, learning how to act in a contradictory dynamic that tells them they are “just like one of the family”, while are still expected to show deference and assume a place of social inferiority.

Ultimately, what employers regard as the main threat is the destabilization of the power asymmetry between the parties. This situation is mitigated through “demarcation repertoires” (Gorbán 2012) that set boundaries and establish social distances, highlighting the differences between employer and employee and constructing the social inferiority of the latter. The use of uniforms and separate utensils, the segregation of domestic space, and prohibitions, limitations, or exclusions regarding food are daily practices that define the different places that workers and employers assume in the social structure. In this vein, paid domestic work not only expresses the dynamics of social inequality, but it also constructs, reproduces, and updates social hierarchies based on gender, class, and racial/ethnic divides.

Inequalities, as social relations, are constructed and experienced in the realm of conviviality (Costa 2019). It is the context of closeness and day-to-day interactions that makes the existence of inequalities between domestic workers and their employers evident, and their effects palpable. Now, if asymmetrical relations are produced and reproduced through social interactions, it is also within them that inequalities can be negotiated, fought, and mitigated.

This article offered various examples of the (re)production of asymmetries in private households. Nevertheless, the possibilities for change also lie within the ambiguity of the labour relationship. Many of the studies here revised point out the contradictory dynamics by which the household becomes, at the same time, a place for hierarchy and solidarity, a site of power relations and reciprocity. It can be a space of private domination and a place where this type of relation is destabilized, where the subaltern shows defiance and resistance. Taking these practices seriously leads to thinking of the household as a political space, not only as a place of reproduction or work, but also a space of struggle, where domestic workers seek to destabilize power relations. In this line, the aforementioned “stratified complementarity” that was said to lead to the legitimation of social asymmetries could be reformulated as an “acknowledgment of interconnectedness and interdependency” (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010: 168), focusing

on connections in multiplicity and their political potential for social change in the context of domination relations, creating a “new cosmological vision of transversal conviviality” (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2010: 168).

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